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## Barnes organizes special event on employment

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Aretha Barnes does not often overhear cries for help or intervention from her often-private students, so when it happened at track practice, she knew she needed to take action.

One of the runners on the team was trying to explain to the head coach why she couldn't regularly make it to practice during an integral time in the season for training. But before the coach could get upset, the runner admitted that she was the only one in her household with a job and had to work some days during practice time.

"That moment made me realize that our kids deal with more than we know about daily," said Barnes.

And as J.L. Mann's career development facilitator, she immediately set to work planning an "Employment Preparedness Night," an effort to help students and families find ways to pull through the strain of the current economic climate.

The event, which will be 4-8 p.m. Thursday at the school, partners J.L. Mann with Personal Pathways to Success to offer free seminars by local professionals in such areas as resume writing, business etiquette, credit building (for students) and re-building (for adults), financial management and networking. There also will be free career assessment and the opportunity for participants to put information on Kudor's Adult Job registry.

Barnes has tried hard in her two years at the school to build up a career development program for the high school students -- she apologizes for the clutter in her teeny office, but explains that she's lately had "a revolving door" of students visiting and meeting with her, definitely a good sign.

"Ms. Barnes is a tireless worker," said Jay Blankenship, from Personal Pathways to Success, an organization striving to educate youth and adults and help them realize career potentials in practical ways.

"She encourages her students to undergo the career-searching process, she reaches out to the community, and it's her idea to engage parents as well," he said.

So far, Barnes has provided career counseling for students, has connected them with local career centers and internships, has set up specific school "career days" to showcase businesses and opportunities from a variety of career clusters, and has taken students job-shadowing to such businesses as Fluor in Greenville.

"Our goal is to be able to give students tangible things they can use later on to benefit them and their skills," she said.

But recently, Barnes has come to understand that, to be most effective, her efforts must extend beyond the school's walls.

"Everything we're taught tells us to gear to kindergarten through 12th grade," she explained. "But we really need to have a holistic approach. We can't just help a child on this end -- we have to do something to help the family as well."

That's just another reason why Barnes is excited for the Employment Preparedness Night. She looks forward to engaging the community and parents, knowing that the information presented will be useful to everyone at some point in their lives.

"It's intimidating to think about how to get back on track," said Barnes, "but we want to give people the opportunity to better their situations. The more prepared and more resources you have, the more you stand out."

Barnes also noted that this event falls seamlessly in line with the mission of J.L. Mann to partner with the community.

"Our families really pull through for us with regards to teams, fundraising and classroom activities," she said.

"The community takes care of us -- there's not a lot that we need that we have to go without. We want (the community) to see us not just as an entity that they give to, but one that gives back to them."

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